

Jean Galbraith: Writer in a Valley

by Meredith Fletcher

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Jean Galbraith (1906-99) spent most of her long life in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. She lived in the family home 'Dunedin' in Tyers, near Traralgon, with her parents and brothers, and later looked after a succession of ailing relatives there. From 'Dunedin', Jean observed the plants and creatures of the valley's changing landscapes and, long before it was considered practicable or desirable, began growing native plants in the garden. Guided by curiosity, care and, increasingly, concern, she recorded her observations in and beyond her beloved garden.

Completing her formal education at the state primary school in the small dairy community of Tyers, Jean was fascinated by the local flora and wanted to learn more. Baron Ferdinand von Mueller's *Key* was still the authoritative text on Victoria's flora, and nature articles could be found in Melbourne newspapers and, of course, *The Victorian Naturalist* (TVN) of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria (FNCV). And there was also the Club's very popular wildflower show each spring.

In October 1922, 16-year-old Jean caught the train at Traralgon to attend the FNCV's wildflower show in the Melbourne Town Hall. Entranced by the floral beauty and diversity, Jean asked the chief organiser, HB Williamson, many questions. The following year, she assisted Williamson at the classifying table and, at his suggestion, joined the Club. In 1925 she provided an impressive display of wildflowers from the vicinity of Traralgon.

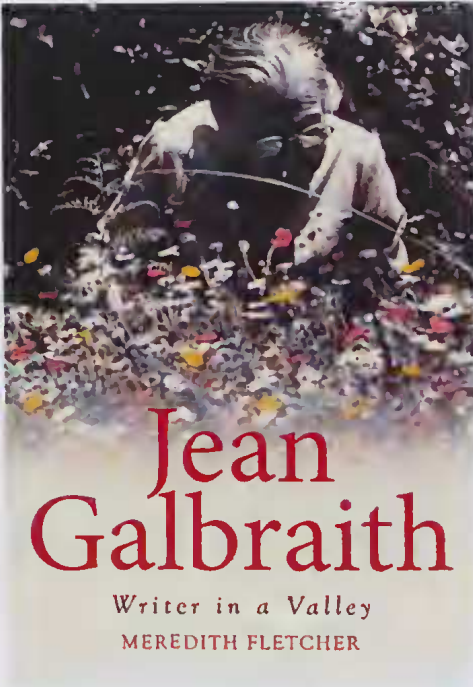
For Jean, the FNCV opened a door to the world of botany. She was already familiar with the writings of several members: Charles Barrett, author, *Herald* nature writer and editor of TVN, Edward Pescott, author of *The Native Flowers of Victoria*; and Edith Coleman, whose native orchid articles were beginning to appear in TVN. Jean's weekly correspondence with Williamson benefited both. Williamson answered her questions and identified

her specimens, which—with her detailed field notes—enriched his substantial herbarium and knowledge of Victoria's flora.

In the mid-1920s, Jean began contributing to TVN and the new *Garden Lover* (later *The Australian Garden Lover*). Using the pseudonym 'Correa', Jean introduced *Garden Lover* readers to indigenous plants in her series 'Australian Native Flowers'. Barrett included her field notes and articles in TVN and introduced her to Donald Macdonald, *Argus* nature writer, whose columns she had long enjoyed reading. As Meredith Fletcher explains: 'Through her correspondence with H.B. Williamson she became a botanist; ... Charles Barrett guided her reading and writing; Donald Macdonald encouraged her inspiration from nature and her nature writing' (p. 103).

Jean's *Garden Lover* articles gently carried conservation messages and led readers out into the bush. When the *Wild Flowers and Native Plants Protection Act* was passed in 1930, Jean explained the new legislation in *The Garden Lover* and provided a display of protected plants (from private land) at the FNCV's 1931 Wild Nature Show. She later converted her *Garden Lover* articles into chapters for her 1939 book, *Garden in a Valley*.

A decade later, Winifred Waddell founded the FNCV's Native Plants Preservation Group (later Society), dedicated to establishing wildflower sanctuaries. Aware of the need to overcome the widespread ignorance about Victoria's native flora, she organised funding and a publisher, and asked Jean to write a popular but accurate field guide. Realising that such a project required access to the collections and library of Melbourne's National Herbarium of Victoria, Jean asked JH (Jim) Willis, Herbarium botanist (and FNCV member) for his help. Willis provided taxonomic and other botanical advice, colorgravure and wrote the preface to *Wildflowers of Victoria* (1950, 1955), which de-



scribed nearly half of Victoria's more than 2000 known species. Fletcher discusses the publication problems that Jean endured in preparing *Wildflowers of Victoria*, its huge popularity with FNCV members, and the FNCV's involvement in the publication of a third edition by Longmans in 1967. While preparing revisions, Jean was permitted to stay overnight in the Herbarium, sleeping on the Baron's couch.

Baptised Christadelphian, Jean deplored the destruction of God-given beauty. Coal mining and forest clear-felling are not attractive processes. As she watched the conversion of nearby riverflats and forests into industrial landscapes, her conservation voice intensified. As the Gippsland representative of the Native Plants Preservation Society, she negotiated the establishment of wildflower sanctuaries and bush reserves and, in 1960, was a founding member of the Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists' Club (LVFNC), which sought to study and save precious remnants of the indigenous vegetation. LVFNC's assistance facilitated her preparation of some of her more than 110 TVN contributions.

With travel help from LVFNC members and more distant friends, Jean, still without a car,

described three quarters of the about 4000 known species indigenous to Australia's eastern temperate region in *A Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of South-East Australia* (Collins 1977).

In his review in TVN, Willis couldn't 'speak too highly of this excellent, very readable and easily understandable volume' (p. 225).

Jean was a remarkable writer. She wrote engagingly for children as well as adults. Before photographs commonly illustrated articles and books, she used beautiful word pictures to describe her subjects.

Elected an honorary life member of the FNCV in 1959, Jean Galbraith was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion in 1970 for promoting interest in natural history and conservation in the general community and 'a greater awareness of our natural heritage' (p. 217).

Towards the end of her life, Jean Galbraith was honoured botanically. Three rare and threatened Victorian species bear her name - *Boronia galbraithiae* Galbraith's Boronia, *Dampiera galbraithiana* Licola Dampiera, and *Prostanthera galbraithiae* Wellington Mint-bush. She is also commemorated by a reserve at Tyers - the Jean Galbraith Flora Reserve. Colour photos portray two of the several endemic Victorian plants named after her—*Boronia galbraithiae* and *Prostanthera galbraithiae*.

Read this fascinating biography to learn how this gentle, modest, generous woman managed to develop her botanical interests and writing projects around numerous domestic duties as aunt, niece, daughter and carer, but not wife or mother. Discover how, from the home of her pioneer settler family, she became a pioneer nature writer and conservationist, as well as a respected botanist.

Meredith's book was the worthy winner of the major prize in the 2015 Victorian Community History Awards.

References

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